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### Church Architecture: A History of Influences

V. Aubrey Hallum

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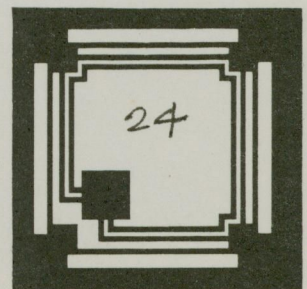
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# **CHURCH ARCHITECTURE**

**A History of Influence**

**V. AUBREY HALLUM ARCHITECTS/PLANNERS**







## CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

### A HISTORY OF INFLUENCE

The New Testament gives no hint that the Christians of the apostolic age built, or wanted to build, places of worship, or that they designated specific places exclusively for cultic uses. Paul writes, "We are the temple of the living God." Jesus had said that he would be present when two or three gathered in his name. The power of the Holy Spirit accompanied the apostles wherever they moved. The followers of Jesus did not simply represent the presence of God on earth; they were the presence. Any sense of need for a specific locus could scarcely have occurred to them, and the lack of any reference in the New Testament suggests that it didn't. From the beginning they gathered to "break bread" in their homes and other private places. They started to teach and preach in the synagogues, but they soon found themselves excluded. So they met wherever it was convenient. Where they were God was, for his name is Immanuel.

By the middle of the third century, the Mesopotamian state of Osrhoene, whose capital was Edessa, had held Christianity to be the official religion for half a century. And it was in this area, at Dura-Europus, that the earliest known ruins of a Christian church have been discovered. It was a dwelling, converted in 232 to be a small church building.

By the last part of the third century the number of Christians was probably in the millions, and it is known that in many places they had acquired property. Often the home in which a congregation had met was given to them. Some building was done long before Constantine's time also, and though there is evidence of variety in the structures, the evidence



seems also to justify a generality or two. One is that the places of worship were domestic in character. One would expect this to be true where the place was still called *domus ecclesiae*, the house of the church, rather than *domus dei*, the house of God. The other generality scarcely different, is that the places were secular in character; the new buildings were patterned not after the forms of temples or shrines but after the basilicas, which were places of civil assembly.

In 313 the Edict of Milan, Constantine's proclamation of toleration, set the stage for the overwhelming change in churchmanship and in the attitudes toward place, enclosure, and the nature of worship which has given us the tradition of church building that has lasted sixteen hundred years and is just now coming to an end.

#### THE REFORMATION

The history of the church building through the Middle Ages is a record of a more explicit expression of a theology, a liturgy, and a piety that contradicted in important ways the essential message of Jesus. And when the Protestant and Catholic reformations of the sixteenth century came, the architectural forms that resulted were only partially corrective. The conservative reformers were at their most conservative in matters of the environment of worship. The destruction of images and relics and the rearrangement of furniture in the existing buildings, and the sharp contrasts of form that appeared in some of the few new places of worship that were built in those times, did not effectively bring the minds of churchmen back into harmony with the mind of the early church.

The lesson to be learned here is that architecture is a more influential factor in the life of society than most people suppose. The incompleteness



of the Reformation in terms of architecture was no doubt the result of the longevity of architecture. Buildings stand, and are not easily removed or changed. The "houses of God" from medieval times continued to stand, continued to assert themselves as "houses of God" because of their strong ecclesiastical character, and continued to teach the people around them that there ought to be such a place as a "house of God." Despite what people read or heard of the words of Jesus or the apostles, the silent voice of architecture spoke more persuasively.

As far as the environment of worship is concerned, the last four centuries have been the children of the Middle Ages, not the Reformation. And most of the churches have continued to establish "holy places," more or less on the medieval patterns.

Yet the light of the Scripture on the subject has not been fully obscured through these sixteen centuries. There has been some continuous glow, and some sparkling flashes deserve our attention. It is true that down through the centuries church buildings have not been consistently seen as exclusively places of worship. Church buildings have been multi-purpose buildings, houses for the people, used for a variety of public and secular events and activities that nourish the human and "secular" life. They have been used for fairs and festivals, as hospitals and hospices, for civic meetings and secular celebrations. And the people have often insisted that the cathedrals and churches were theirs, and not the exclusive domain of the clerics, the ecclesiastical establishment, and the cultic event. The multi-purpose use of churches signifies that Christians have retained the sense that if the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath, so the cultic place should be for man.



From time to time religious groups have explicitly rejected the establishment position and reasserted the New Testament posture. Some of the radical reformers opposed the concept of a particular place of worship and brought their worship back to the homes. The first Mennonite meeting houses in Pennsylvania came long after the settlers had established themselves. They were finally built because none of the farmsteads could provide shelter for all the horses in the cold winters through the three-hour services; and so extensive stables were built with the meeting houses adjacent. The Puritans built meeting houses, quite secular in form and detail, and used them for any public assembly. The early Methodists had their places of worship in any convenient barn or loft, and when they built, their architecture was consciously non-ecclesiastical. In Scotland the custom of locking the church except during services prevailed. When the people were not there, the building was not to be thought of as a place of Divine presence. The church moved with the people to their homes. And everywhere, in innumerable circumstances, Christians have met in ad hoc shelters, knowing that the presence of God was not really associated with particular places or places with a particular architectural character.

This is so commonly acknowledged as to be axiomatic. Yet over sixteen centuries most Christians have thought that if possible they should provide a "holy place," a "house of God." It is now time, because we are again in a time of lively renewal of the church, and because we have in the course of a half-century been moving steadily in the direction of recovering the pre-Constantinian position, to redefine the conception of how Christians shelter their liturgies.



## THE RESTORATION AND THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

The Church of Christ accepts the New Testament as the guide to faith and practice, to work and worship. The gospels, the Acts, and the letters are all rich in teachings and examples of worship. They teach us that our worship must be in spirit and in reality, not after the forms of the Law, not to be seen of men, nor filled with vain repetitions. They teach us that our expressions of worship must be consistent with our whole existence, that it must be both of the spirit and the understanding, and that our communal worship must be done decently and in order. They supply us with an abundance of examples of acts of worship and with an understanding of their underlying spirit; but there are few examples which concern themselves with how particular acts of worship were carried out in the assembly. There are no examples of how a whole series of these expressions of worship were knit together into a "service." The early Christians worshipped wherever they could, most frequently in a domestic setting. Their worship was not highly formalized and ritualistic, but rich in fellowship and filled with the Spirit.

Our aim is the same as was that of the early Christians. We seek to be true worshippers that our worship may be pleasing to the Lord. The expressions of our worship are the same. We keep the Supper, we sing, we pray, we teach, we give, but the particular order of the parts and the functional aspects of the parts or acts of a service may indeed be quite different from those of the first century. What constitutes Christian worship is very clear, but how it is to be conducted is largely left up to us to work out in an orderly manner consistent with purpose and spirit. However, it is our responsibility to do it in a way which will allow us to worship in spirit and in truth, being wholly consistent with the spirit and example of worship in the New Testament.



Many of the things we do in worship are done in a particular way for good reason; perhaps it is the best possible way it could be done. Others are done in a particular way because of habit or tradition, and still others because our buildings have invariably dictated them to be done in a particular way. Tradition and familiarity do play an important part--we cannot worship if we are constantly confronted with the unfamiliar or the uncomfortable, but from time to time we need to re-examine our ways of conducting services and the implications of traditional building arrangements to see that we are providing the most suitable setting and encouragement for worship.

The worship service itself is actually experienced in the context of a series of activities that take place from the time we arrive at the church parking lot until we leave. Because of this, it seems appropriate to examine the whole experience item by item. The scheme of this analysis is to try to identify the significance in each action and try to suggest appropriate architectural considerations that might help the action and enhance the whole experience of worship.

#### Preparation for Worship

Although the whole of Christian life is a service of worship and the apostle Paul instructs us to pray without ceasing, there is something special about the periods of time which are set aside for worship together. When we assemble for worship it is not like any other kind of assembly because of our identity and purpose. In a real sense worship services begin with the act of assembling, rather than the first song or prayer. When we assemble in the name of Christ and in his presence we are assembled in a physical way as the body of Christ, as a nation of priests, as the family of God to whom we offer our service of worship.



The Father requires that those who would truly be worshipers of Him worship Him in spirit and in truth, or as Phillips renders it "in spirit and in reality." We can't worship Him with empty words or vain repetitions. We must sincerely mean the things we say in the songs and prayers. It is very difficult for the most spiritual of men to switch attention in a moment from topics of social conversation or the problems of driving, parking, etc. to the lofty and spiritual plane of thought expressed in our songs, our prayers, and the scriptures. It is obvious from these facts that most, if not all, of us require some mental and emotional preparation before we can worship spiritually as we must. The thing that is significant about the time between our arrival at the church parking lot or the dismissal of Bible classes and the first song or prayer is that this time must in some way be used by every worshiper as a time for preparation of himself for the service of worship. Our concern here is with how the building and the spaces outside it can help us prepare for worship. Isn't it possible for the spaces through which we walk both outside and in to contribute to this preparation?

The same kind of preparation is needed when we move from the classes to the room set aside for worship. In our classes we participate primarily without rational faculties, but in the worship we participate with greater devotion both emotionally and rationally, with "the spirit and the understanding," as Paul put it.

Preparation has always been an integral part of worship in all religions, but it is often given less attention by us today than by people of almost any other time or faith. Perhaps our personal relationship to God makes it possible for us to prepare ourselves more easily than the patriarch who took his sacrifice to the top of a mountain and built an altar in preparation for his worship. There is also the possibility that we have



a tendency to enter into worship more casually than we ought. A church building should discourage this, and instead, encourage us to be quiet, to be meditative and reverently purposeful.

The experience of entering into the room set aside for worship and of taking a seat in that room should help us to prepare for what we are to do. There should be a sense of transition from the busier, noisier spaces of the vestibule and outside. The act of entering the room should first make us aware of a change--anticipation and then the quietness of the room and a sense of purpose. The room itself should induce quietness as we fill it; but the quietness should not be a coldness or a rigidity, but a closeness. The warmth of fellowship and spiritual anticipation should fill each heart as we prepare together for our offering of worship.

#### Program of the Worship Service

The parts of the worship service may be considered under six headings:

1. The devotional: prayers, songs and readings.
2. Religious teaching: instruction in almost any form, by one or more persons, but usually in the form of a sermon.
3. The Lord's Supper: kept every Lord's Day.
4. Giving: a contribution of our means on the first day of the week.
5. Responses to the "invitation," and Baptism.

We try to conduct each of these parts in an appropriate and orderly fashion, yet beyond this we try to compose these things together into a single, complete offering to God. Our aim is not a mysterious or dramatic form of worship but a humble, sincere and unpretentious expression of our devotion and dedication.

#### The Devotional

The worship service usually begins with a devotional period in which we re-affirm our dependence upon the Father, confess our sins, plead for mercy and forgiveness, attempt to praise God, express thanksgiving and



make our supplications known. The expressions of our devotion are our prayers and songs and our quiet meditation upon the Word. The devotional is a period of communion of the saints with each other and with the Father. The bond of faith and spirit is drawn tight by the common participation in the thoughts and words of the hymns and prayers. Again, the room needs to contribute to this feeling of communion which is so much a part of our common worship.

### Prayer

The Christian prays; he does not say prayers. Customarily our prayers are extemporaneous expressions of our hearts and minds led by a single person. Our minds follow the thoughts he directs and we add our own thoughts and our "Amen" to his. The attention during prayer is not a visual attention; that is, we do not make contact with the leader with our eyes, rather we are drawn into the spirit and the thought of the prayer. This type of prayer requires that the room be quiet, that noise of movement be muffled and that the prayer be comfortably audible to the entire congregation. In a room for many people, this means the "leader" of the prayer must move to a microphone. Prayer may also be led from places in the room other than the pulpit and the table, perhaps from the general audience area. Chain prayers and other types of prayer led from the audience area could be effective if the acoustics of the room made it possible and if the seating area itself were compact.

### Singing

A major part of our devotions are the hymns and spiritual songs. The charge to us is as it was to the Ephesians (5:18-19) -- "...be filled with the spirit; speaking one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord." Our custom is for



every song to be sung as a congregation or as a chorus of the whole. The use of hymnals and a "leader" or "song director" are expedient aids to congregational singing. While important, they should serve without distracting from the act of worship. Again, the acoustics of the room are a most important factor. The acoustic design should be such that the singing voices will be blended and rich and at the same time allow the words to be clearly heard and distinguished. The leader should not be a prominent focus of attention. Perhaps he leads from a point less conspicuous than the pulpit.

### Preaching

Instruction by the Spirit is through the scriptures, presented through song, reading, teaching and preaching. The word "preaching" encompasses reading and teaching. Its form is flexible, being influenced by the size of the audience, the characteristics of the speaker, the subject and the available aids to instruction.

Rhetoric in public speaking has given way to a more conversational style which effects a more natural and intimate contact between speaker and listener. Eye contact between speaker and audience is important to the manner of today's preacher. Visual aids are becoming increasingly popular and valuable. A fully equipped pulpit area might include integral provisions for visual aids; perhaps with controls for lights and the showing of slides and film strips by the speaker from the pulpit. These devices may be provided in an inconspicuous manner to be out of sight when not in use.

Mobility is another essential to today's preacher. He must be able to move from behind the pulpit to the front row of seats and still be heard. This may require a mobile microphone system of high quality and a



sound system which will perform well with the microphone in different locations.

### The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper was instituted by Jesus on that memorable occasion in the upper room the night before His crucifixion. Each Lord's Day we partake of this feast which we understand to be spiritual, and a memorial of a sacrifice, rather than a sacrifice itself. The bread which we eat is the memorial of His body, and the wine His blood. We keep the feast as a simple and solemn supper in His memory until He comes again.

The large number of persons involved makes it impractical to gather physically around a table and partake together of the supper. Customarily, after the individual blessings, the emblems are passed in an expeditious manner so that all may be served in a reasonable length of time during our attention span. The means of passing the emblems is unimportant and attention drawn to this action should be minimized. Attention instead should be drawn to the emblems, to the prayer, and inward thoughts of the cross. The table can be placed in such a manner that the congregation feels gathered around it and feels the sense of partaking together of the Supper in communion with Christ. This most beautiful memorial should not be confused or lumped together with any other actions that might detract from it such as visitors' registration or contribution merely because ushers are used for both functions. Giving is also an action that takes place principally in the heart, and as significant a part of the worship service as it is, some clear differentiation between it and the Lord's Supper is desirable, even essential. Our customary way of grouping the act of giving with the Supper is primarily a convenience for the ushers, so they may pass both and then be seated with their families. However, the



expedient should not be allowed to detract from the observance of either giving or partaking of the Supper.

Architecturally, this means a separate place may be provided for the contribution plates or baskets; and, functionally, it may mean the order of services is arranged so that the gifts are made after the devotional and before the Lord's Supper with a separate song or reading of preparation.

#### Responses and Baptism

Customarily, our sermons end with an "invitation" and are followed by an "invitation song" encouraging responses by those who wish to put on Christ in baptism, ask for the prayers of the Church or join themselves to the congregation. Accessibility by way of aisles to the front is all that is required of the building for this action. However, if there is a balcony, a direct means of access to the main floor should be considered.

Confession and Baptism also establish some requirements for the building. First, the confession. This is usually, though not necessarily, taken before entering the baptistry. It is desirable that the one confessing Christ be both seen and heard by the entire congregation, as he makes the "good confession." A microphone may be provided.

The act of baptism we believe to be of paramount importance, with emmersion being preserved as the form which truly is a figure of the burial and the resurrection. This act is significant to the congregation of witnesses by recalling to every Christian the new man which he has put on and the new life which has risen to live. To the subject of baptism it is the new birth, the birth through which the blood of Christ washes away his sins and through which he becomes an heir of Promise. This beautiful and significant act is too often handled with awkwardness, detracting from its impact on both subject and witness. The ceremony is indeed a drama--a



symbolic replaying of the death and the triumph of the resurrection. Of course, the efficacy of the act lies in its being done in obedience to God's will, but its exceeding beauty and richness need not be obscured by thoughtless or clumsy handling.

Perhaps we should re-study the customary way in which we conduct this act, not so that we may "add to it," but so that it may be performed more fittingly and appropriately.

No church can plan a building to truly answer to its needs until it is clear about its primary goals; no church should have a building until it has considered not having a building - and accomplishing its goals through other means. As we consider the alternatives of not having a building we can be led to discover the best use of our limited resources, and in doing so find which works can really be helped by building. We may then be able to plan one to fit the unique needs of each congregation.

A building is a tool, merely one of many aids to help a congregation to achieve its purpose. But it can be more. It can participate in the purpose of the church, help to make it possible, make it real, focus and identify it, symbolize it, and reveal it.



